An Integrated Approach to Language Programme Development

By Brian Paltridge

This paper describes an integrated English language programme for non-native English speakers studying in an English-medium academic learning environment. The programme focuses on developing academic communication skills as well as providing an opportunity for personal language and learning skills development. The course aims at integrating language and learning strategy development within the general content area of English as an International Language (Smith 1981, 1983, 1987). The course integrates process and product-oriented approaches to language programme design (White 1988) with content-based approaches to teaching academic writing (Shih 1986; Raimes 1991).

The programme provides specific instruction in reading and note-taking skills, writing in academic contexts, seminar presentation, and tutorial participation as well as individual language development. Whilst the emphasis on academic communication and learning skills addresses the group of students as a whole, language development work is individualised and takes place on the basis of individual learning contracts. Students receive training in self-directed learning strategies to enable them to make their own decisions about what their needs are, when, where and how to work, and what materials to use, (Riley 1982).

The course content relates directly to the learners' language experiences. Topics include native and nonnative varieties of English, implications for international and intercultural communication, and the influence of English on other languages. Research on the relationship of content knowledge to writing performance has shown that familiarity with a subject dramatically influences the writing performance of ESL writers. This is supported by Adamson, who concludes that "academic skills are best taught in connection with authentic content material" (Adamson 1990:67).

Students develop the ability to transfer from one mode of language use to another in a way that reflects the language behavior and expectations of an English language academic learning environment. The course, thus, attempts to approximate actual conditions of language use in an academic context.

Programme Focus

The programme can be divided into three broad areas: English as an international language, academic communication skills, and personal language development.

Organisation of Course Content

The organisation of course content reflects the three general areas. Academic communication skills and content focus are integrated through course materials while personal language development is addressed in response to learners' needs as the course progresses.

English as an International Language

Academic communication tasks relate primarily to the use of English in international and intranational contexts. Program content, thus, draws from the view of society as an international community in which English is the lingua franca of communication.

This section of the course compares the notions of English as a Second Language, English as a Foreign Language, and English as an International Language. It also examines the role of English in areas such as international business, international education and research, and the international communications network. In examining the notion of World Englishes (Kachru 1992a, 1992b), students consider native and nonnative varieties of English, the notion of "New Englishes" (Pride 1982, Platt, et al. 1984) and different models of English for use in international contexts. The course then turns its attention to the notion of intercultural communicative competence (Baxter 1983), culture learning (Damen 1987), communication strategies (Tarone and Yule 1987), and intercultural training (Damen 1987, Brislin and Landis 1983). Finally, the course considers the influence English has had on other languages of the world.

Academic Communication Skills

Writing tasks cover the range of basic writing requirements in an English-medium academic learning environment. These include summaries of, or reactions to readings, annotated bibliographies, reports, case studies, documented essays, and research projects. Patterns of rhetorical organisation in these pieces of writing include problem/solution, topic/restriction/illustration, descriptions, discussions, cause-and-effect, and compare-and-contrast. In this sense, the programme can also be said to include a genre-based syllabus which "is founded on the identification and analysis of the specific genres the students are required to read and write in their subject-based studies" (Davies 1988:132).

Specific micro-skills in the writing component include expressing sentential relations, developing grammatical cohesion, using discourse markers, drawing attention to main points, distinguishing main points from supporting detail, summarising, and transcoding information from charts to text. Attention is also given to analyzing essay examination prompts, which require learners to display familiarity with particular concepts, processes, and argumentation (Horowitz 1987).

Reading skills draw from Munby's (1978) taxonomy of micro- skills and functions, the English Language Testing System (ELTS) needs analysis (Carroll 1981) and Emmett's (1985) three-year survey of the needs of ESL students in British universities. These skills include skimming a text for general understanding, scanning a text to locate specific information, identifying the main points in a text, distinguishing main points from supporting detail, deducing lexical meanings from context, making inferences from a text, and understanding reference information.

Oral communication skills concentrate largely on seminar presentations and tutorial participation as both of these areas have been described in the literature as being particularly problematic for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Personal Language Development

The aim of the personal language development component of the programme is to foster an autonomous and independent approach to learning. It concentrates on four main areas. These are defining individual needs, setting individual language learning goals and objectives, establishing an independent language learning programme, and monitoring learning. Students receive direction in drawing up a learning contract, selecting resources and learning strategies, and drawing on the community as a resource for learning. This section of the course examines self-assessment and reflection on learning, covering issues such as monitoring and self-correction, evaluation of learning goals, construction of self-assessment checklists, and keeping a learning diary (Dickinson 1987).

Teaching and Learning

The approach to teaching and learning employed in the programme focuses on both the process of developing academic communication skills as well as the learning-product or outcome. That is, it reflects the dual demands on nonnative English speakers in an academic context of "writing to learn the language and writing to learn" (Davies 1988:131).

Classroom activities include reading different sources to prepare for writing essays, making seminar presentations, and participating in tutorial discussions. In writing, the focus is on reader expectations and the stages of the writing process itself. Learners engage in planning, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing their work approximating the various products of writing required in an academic learning environment. Attention is given "to form, content, writer, and reader" (Raimes 1991:422).

The programme also includes preparation for an end-of-course examination touching on major content areas of the course. In this examination students are required to answer both short and long-answer questions and draw on skills developed in the course for analysing and responding to examination questions.

Teaching and Learning Resources

There is no one text for this course. There is, instead, a collection of readings including Smith (1981, 1983, 1987), Platt et al (1984), Bailey and Gorlach (1985), Kachru (1992a, 1992b) and journals such as World Englishes and Cross Currents.

Instructional materials for academic communication skills vary according to the proficiency level of each group of students. Two basic texts, however, are typically drawn on that were developed in the TESOL Programs Unit at the University of Queensland (Laaksonen 1989) and the Learning Assistance Centre at the University of Sydney (Webb 1991).

There is of course no set text for the personal-language development component since it is oriented to the learning needs of the individual students. Students are provided with, or directed to, relevant language learning materials and opportunities, as appropriate. Sources that the teaching staff have found useful for this component include Geddes and Sturtridge (1982), Dickinson (1987), Brookes and Grundy (1988), and Brindley (1989).

Assessment

Assessment draws upon self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and teacher evaluation. This includes ongoing assessment of reading, writing and speaking tasks, participation in tutorial discussions, seminar presentations, a portfolio presentation (Hamp-Lyons 1994), and an end of semester examination. Students also carry out and report on a research project related to one of the particular themes of the course. In the area of personal language development, assessment includes identifying learning needs and establishing individually set learning goals.

Conclusion

The idea of an integrated approach to language programme development is not new, nor are language programmes which provide instruction for self-directed learning to encourage learner independence and autonomy. It is less common, however, for these approaches to be integrated into one overall programme and, in particular, one for nonnative speakers of English studying in an English-medium academic learning environment. By drawing on Raimes' (1991) notion of a balanced process approach to language programme development, it has been possible to integrate both process and product aspects of language and learning skills development within one single programme.

This programme recognises the complexity of language and communication skills development, and the diversity of our learners and their learning processes. It also recognises the politics of a pedagogy which harnesses the power of literacy and learning skills along with a critical consciousness of the discourse practices of the speech community our learners are wishing to enter.

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